

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

### **“Ayers All Access” Podcast**

*Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation  
Lipscomb University College of Education*

### **Episode 12 – July 25, 2022**

Title: *Character Education as the Missing Piece*

File Length: 00:24:13

#### **SPEAKERS:**

Dr. Rachael Milligan                      Assistant Dean for Program Innovation, Lipscomb College of Education  
Director, Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation

Dr. Hank Stags                              Director of Accelerating Character Education Development,  
National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET)

#### **FULL TRANSCRIPT:**

**Rachael Milligan:** Hello. Welcome to the Ayers All Access Podcast brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. This podcast is a chance for us to help you access compelling people, current topics, practical tips, and innovative solutions— all related to the field of education. To find out more about this podcast and all the work of the Ayers Institute, check out our website at [AyersInstitute.org](http://AyersInstitute.org). You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook at [@AyersInstitute](https://twitter.com/AyersInstitute).

I'm Rachael Milligan, and I serve as the Assistant Dean for Program Innovation in Lipscomb's College of Education and the Director of the Ayers Institute. Thanks for joining us for this 'spotlight' episode focused on character education as the missing piece.

Today, we will be talking with Hank Staggs, Director of Accelerating Character Education Development at the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET). Hank is a great friend of the Institute and we are so happy to spotlight your work in character education today. Thank you for joining us!

**Hank Staggs:** Rachael, thank you. Great to be here.

**Rachael Milligan:** Well, Hank, we'd love for you to tell us a little bit about yourself and your work as we get started.

**Hank Staggs:** Sure. So historically, I've been in school leadership. In the last year and a half with the NIET National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. And we work with schools and school districts to help them organically develop character initiatives within their school. We try not to say "program," but we work with them, you know, where they are to elevate and develop character for their students and for the adults in the buildings.

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay. "Elevate in an organic way." I really like that. I like that. So, focused on that character education piece: How would you define character education?

**Hank Staggs:** Oh, great question. And you know, when you say "character," so many, you know, people have different things that come to mind. You know, most of the time when people say character, they think of morals. That's typically what we have found.

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Character is the impression or the imprint that a person has in their personality, in their being, how they are. And so, what we're trying to do is help schools foster positive imprints on students so that they can go and have flourishing successful lives beyond school. So, character education is the process of doing that. We differentiate, you know, two different things. Character could be the traits, the virtues, the values, the pillars, whatever you want to call those locally. But then character education itself is the process to foster that.

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay. Now, that makes a lot of sense. So, you know, in your work— in our discussions prior to today— you've called character education, really, "the missing piece." So, I wonder if you could expound on that a little bit. Why do you see it that way?

**Hank Staggs:** You know, over the last, I don't know, 25, maybe even 30 years in education, we've had such an emphasis on academic success. And I think some of that has been driven nationally, some even globally, that we want to be competitive and we want our students to succeed. And all of that is true. And we are in favor of that.

But I think one thing that that may be missing is that we've really pushed aside character and morals and social living and civics and some of those things that really enable us as humans in society to flourish. And often, I've heard the story— some of the experts in the field will ask this question and they'll say, "Okay, you've got a choice to live on island A or island B. On Island A, you have all these folks that were I mean, most of them made a 30 or above on the ACT, they were super smart, they can read, they can do math, all this stuff— but they have no character. There's no integrity. There's no citizenship. There's no social justice. There's none of that. OR... You can live on island B. On island B, you know, mostly C students, a lot of D students, you know, probably nobody made a 30 on the ACT— but they are filled with character. They are people of integrity. They are people of social justice and equity. They love each other and have courage and take initiative and all those things. SO... Which island do you want to live on? And when we when we talk to schools and we do our trainings, you know, it's sort of a no brainer. People choose Island B, right?

**Rachael Milligan:** Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So that that 'missing piece' idea really resonates when you put it in such stark contrast to each other. The island idea. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

You mentioned a moment ago the focus on academic performance in education and you know, how we've kind of come away from all of these attributes that you talked about. Have you ever encountered, or do you encounter in your work this idea of character is in competition with the academic piece, you know, as far as just time in the day or, you know, resources, capacity? Do you ever see that competition still or is it kind of an easy sell, I guess?

**Hank Staggs:** You know, it's an easy sell in a conversation like this. But then when you get into the real work and you're rolling up your sleeves and you go back to your daily bell schedule— right then, that question comes up.

There's a couple of different ways that we typically respond to that. One is that, you know, back to the organic cultivating character in the school, we want character to be a part of everything we do.

**Rachael Milligan:** Mm hmm.

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

**Hank Staggs:** So, it's really not an either/or. We want character to be part of your core instruction. We want character to be part of the very ethos of the school culture. So, it's really not you choose time between the two. You can actually do both at the same time.

The other response is that character— we have found (and you can read this in the literature)— character actually increases and encourages and strengthens academic performance. A lot of the intellectual virtues, for example, are virtues that your math teacher, your science teacher, your English teacher would want their students to know and do and execute, you know, in their classes. So, some of those things, we have found that, actually academic success improves.

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay. Can you share an example of one of the intellectual virtues and maybe how a teacher could roll that out in their class or make it part of what they're doing on a daily basis?

**Hank Staggs:** Sure. One would be "creativity." Would be an intellectual virtue. And so "how can we promote creativity? How can we think students to define things within themselves?"

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay.

**Hank Staggs:** Another one would be problem solving. Which I think is even in lots of teacher rubrics.

**Rachael Milligan:** Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

**Hank Staggs:** So, problem solving would be considered a character attribute or a character virtue, if you will. And, you know, I'm not sure I've ever met a math teacher that would not want their students to be strong in problem solving.

**Rachael Milligan:** That's right.

**Hank Staggs:** So, you know, we could label that as character and say, "Okay. How can we encourage that to be imprinted on our students?" Right. So, where they use problem solving skills in math, but then also in life.

**Rachael Milligan:** Yes. Yes, absolutely.

So thinking about the missing piece idea, going back to that a little bit, is there a story that you can think of that comes to mind that kind of really epitomizes that idea of why it's the missing piece, or maybe how the missing piece— There was something missing and then this character idea or this character education came in and filled in that gap.

**Hank Staggs:** You know, there's one school that comes to mind in Arkansas, actually Cross County, Arkansas. You know, they have been, you know, for years, highly performing, sort of were at the top of their game as far as instructional strategies, academic success. And when we first introduced this idea to their superintendent, one of the first things he said was, "This is the missing piece." And so that's really, kind of, how we got that idea— was from him. And he said, you know, "This this is it. This is what we've been missing." He said, "I knew there was something missing. We did our work. We train our teachers. Our teachers are rock solid. You know, we use high quality rubrics. We use lots of collaborative planning," he said. "But really, our school culture was just missing this piece on character and how we socialize and how we integrate so that our students can flourish once they leave here."

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

**Rachael Milligan:** Mm hmm.

You mentioned the teachers just then. What kind of impact have you seen this have on teachers? You know, I think a lot of these ideas, like creativity and problem solving, have been— sometimes teachers feel like they don't have time for that. Talk about a little bit about what impact this has had on teachers or in the classroom as far as that goes.

**Hank Staggs:** Yeah. Like anything else when you introduce a new initiative or an idea, you know, you have some that just jump on board instantly. And so— and I don't know, a percentage, I couldn't tell you that. But a certain number of teachers generally would say, "Oh, yes, I want to do that. You know, how can I sign up?"

**Rachael Milligan:** Mm hmm.

**Hank Staggs:** And then on the opposite end of that spectrum, we'll have teachers that say, "Oh, no, I don't have time for that." And then we'll have some in the middle that are a little unsure. And so, what we really try to stress is that this is not something extra. Right. So nobody— no principal that I've met, no teacher that we've talked to— is asking for something else to do. Nobody wants that. I mean, even the people that buy in quickly, they still don't want something extra to do. So, the way we've approached that is this is something that you can embed into your classroom. Generally, we find that, you know, social studies, English teachers, it's pretty easy. Once your school has identified character attributes or character traits or some side character pillars, once you've identified those at your school, then in your collaborative planning session, let's talk about how we can implement that into our core lesson that we're going to teach next week.

And again, for those social studies, English readings, so forth, it's pretty easy to do. And so, instantly they start to see connections and say, "Oh yeah, there's actually a character in our story that showed courage or showed creativity or showed citizenship or maybe lack thereof." And so those teachers start to say, Oh, yeah, I could do that, and I could do that without any extra time. You know, they already have a PLC or a collaborative planning session, so why not put this on the agenda? Put your character initiative on the agenda in that meeting and just explore how you can bring that out into your class.

You know, math and science tend to push back a little more.

**Rachael Milligan:** Yeah.

**Hank Staggs:** And I can pick on math people. I was a math teacher, so I tell the math people, we can do this, right. Maybe it's not in the explicit curriculum, but do you ever do grouping? Do you want your students in the groups to interact socially in a positive way? Well, then let's teach them how to do that. Let's talk about citizenship, let's talk about friendliness, let's talk about respect. And so bring those character traits into your grouping in math class. And again, that's not something extra. That's not a new lesson. That's not extra prep. Just put it on your PLC agenda and think, okay, "Where can I bring this in next week in my lesson?" And that usually fits well with teachers.

**Rachael Milligan:** Yeah, because it's what they want and what they're striving for anyway. Absolutely.

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

So, you've been doing this work in lots of school districts and lots of individual schools. So what results are being seen in the places you've been?

**Hank Staggs:** You know, it's a slow process. And we tell people this is a marathon, not a sprint. And it's, you know, school people. We don't like slow initiatives.

**Rachael Milligan:** Right.

**Hank Staggs:** We want to see action quickly and we want to see results quickly. And all that is to be understood and respected. But we also have to realize that we're talking about life skills. You know, one of the key components or key elements of best practice and character education is there is a developmental piece of this. Just like adults. You know, adults are at different stages of the journey in their own character and so are our students. So, some are farther along than others. But the idea is if we can teach these and get these into schools, then it makes a big difference. And schools just have to say that it is a slow process. It takes time.

So, in a year's time, a school could identify their virtues, revise their mission, envision, begin to put those virtues into core lessons and have those conversations. And of course, we could expand even further. There are pieces of we want to bring this into our whole school community, meaning the stakeholders outside the school. It also means that we want to engage adults in the building, and that's why we don't really like to call this a program. There are lots of great character programs on the market and schools can go in sort of 'off the shelf' purchase those and go and implement and those are great. There's some really good ones.

We don't promote a program per se, and that's why we say we like this organically for one reason is because it we want to connect with the adults in the building. Most of most of the programs do not connect adults. The adults have to be a part of this. And again, to say all of that takes time.

**Rachael Milligan:** Right.

You mentioned a couple of times about, you know, starting with identifying the character values or traits. What can you give us? Just a brief overview of what that means.

**Hank Staggs:** You know, in a nutshell, a brief overview would be: That's just old school— "identify your core values." Right. You know, we've done that for years and years and years. And most schools have not done that. Sometimes it's on paper, most of the time it's on paper because they were forced to do that for some type of accreditation or state approval or something. And then when we go into school and we say, okay, well what are your core values? Then they go to a notebook or they go to their website and put that up, and then they say, Well, what does this mean? Well, we don't really know. We've never talked about that.

And so, part of it is just starting where you are seeing what it is that you have and then asking your folks what's important. And I'll tell you a story from a Tennessee school district. We went in and they invited community members in and had lunch. Parents— they had a parent group. And they also had a business group. And we just asked them, "What does it take for a student to flourish in your community? What attributes would you want to see in them, you know, as adults? And so, we had great responses. Business leaders, you know, started naming traits and attributes of, "Hey, we want this in people that work for us." Parents said, "Hey, we want these attributes in our students." So that's where we started.

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

So now how can we get these attributes inside of our students at school? And we know as adults we have to model those.

**Rachael Milligan:** Yes. And what a great what a great way to have that conversation from the very beginning and not, you know, bringing the community in at the start and saying, "We want our graduate to look like this so that they can contribute to the community."

As you've been engaging in this work in lots of different places, what would you say is the biggest misconception that you've encountered regarding character education as you all approach it?

**Hank Staggs:** Probably one that you've already mentioned, and that is that character is something extra.

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay.

**Hank Staggs:** That character is a stand-alone program or initiative. And is really not. Character education can be embedded into the very ethos and fabric of your school. Another way to say that is, is really we want you to have a culture of character in your school. I haven't met a principal yet that did not want to improve their school culture. Whether it's good or bad, everybody thinks about school culture. Most of us really don't know how to do that. I didn't really know how to do that as a principal. So, we're still learning how to do that. But that's what the character piece is. The character piece IS your school culture. And if we can get that right, then everything else sort of sits on that plate or falls under that umbrella, if you will.

**Rachael Milligan:** Yeah.

You just mentioned your— that you have experience as a principal. So, if this had come to you sitting in an administrator seat, what would you have done with it? What would have been your reaction to this? If you can kind of go back in time and think about yourself there.

**Hank Staggs:** Oh, I love that question.

You know what I would love to think that I would do is just jump on board and say, "This is what we're going to do!" I mean, I see such an importance and an impact from this, that if we make character the basis of everything that we do, and if our school would identify these, you know, core pillars or core attributes, and we build everything we do around those from academics to discipline to community service to all of that. All of that sits on this plate of character. I would love to do that for my school. Absolutely.

You know, one of our colleagues was an 18-year principal in the St Louis area, and he took over a school that was failing academically. And he took a lot of courage and said, "Hey, we're going to make character the basis of everything we do." And the end of the story, fast forward, is that his school ended up being a national school of character— twice.

**Rachael Milligan:** Wow.

**Hank Staggs:** And his academic scores went out the roof. And he said, you know what? We never really put a huge emphasis on academics. Quite frankly. We just focused on the kind of people that we want to

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

be in the school. And then when you see the character come out that promotes academics! And students can be successful if they live those character traits out.

**Rachael Milligan:** Absolutely. You know, at the end of the day, it's all about the student. And the story you just shared really highlights that. I wonder, as you've been in and out of schools a lot. I wonder if there's any particular student story you can think of that this has had an impact on their life or their trajectory or their outlook or anything like that.

**Hank Staggs:** Wow. I would love to think that there is. I know some 'group of student' stories.

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay.

**Hank Staggs:** One would be, again, a school in East Tennessee. And we brought this idea in. We worked with them and they had their we identified character traits and we worked with their community and they did some surveys and all that. And then, fast forward a couple of months. I went back for a visit and the principal pushed across the table these drawings. And these were drawings, artwork, of their character words. Their character traits. I forget what they called them in particular. So, these are words on different page. And I thought, "Man, these are fabulous." I said, "So who did you contract with to produce these for you?" And he said, "Contract? Those are student produced." This is a middle school.

**Rachael Milligan:** That's awesome.

**Hank Staggs:** He said, "Our student art club did that."

**Rachael Milligan:** Wow.

**Hank Staggs:** And really, what got me in that story, I thought, "Wow, that's great." And then we walked down to the cafeteria and they had started stenciling these on the cafeteria wall, and they're going to paint those and it's really cool. But then he said, you realize— he said, "Our art club never got any attention before. Matter of fact, there were kids in there that they probably considered themselves outcast and they joined the art club. Maybe some of them did really like art, and some of them just didn't really have a lot of friends and didn't have another club to go to. And so, this was sort of one of those clubs that, you know, students just kind of jumped in without somewhere else to go." And he said, "But now their work is going to be on the cafeteria wall. And they— now they feel like they are somebody." And it sort of models that empowerment of students in this case.

**Rachael Milligan:** Absolutely. What a powerful story that just makes me smile. That's great. So, thinking about those who are listening. Those who are really thinking about this idea of character and exploring that. What would you suggest as first steps for those interested in getting on this road?

**Hank Staggs:** Yeah. There are lots of places to go. There's lots of good literature out there. Probably, nationally, one of the leaders in character education is The Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri - Saint Louis. Dr. Marvin Berkowitz and his team have led that work. They've put out lots of lots of literature pieces. He's recently released a book just last year called The Primed Model for Character Education. And that's excellent.

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

But really, you know, a first place to be, I guess, is to make this a priority. Your question about what would you do as a principal? You really have to make this a priority and say, "Yes, we're going to do this. And yes, we're going to take this forward." And then just search out there. Another one would be the Jubilee Center is probably the global leader in character education. You could easily go to their websites and read all sorts of information. And certainly, at NIET, we've also put some information out there that you could go to our website and access some of that.

But, I guess as a principal, too: I was never aware that this was out there.

**Rachael Milligan:** Mm hmm.

**Hank Staggs:** Now, if principals will just look, it's out there. Very helpful. Very practical. And, you know, again, contact us at NIET and we'd be happy to steer you in some of those directions.

**Rachael Milligan:** Okay. And we'll make sure that that contact information is in our show notes as well for this podcast. Is there anything else you'd like to add about this topic before we wrap it up today?

**Hank Staggs:** No, thank you for having me. You know, I guess the thing that has really opened my eyes is this is life changing work. When we talk about character, we talk about flourishing in society. We can truly make a difference for kids in our schools. Because, yeah, we want them to be successful in school but the reason we have school is so they can be successful in life. And if we get the academics right, that's great. But if we get the academics right and we miss character, then I think we missed it.

Even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, "Intelligence plus character. That's the goal of true education."

**Rachael Milligan:** Absolutely. Well, Hank, thank you so much for sharing this information with us today. And thank you for your work and character education.

**Hank Staggs:** Thank you for having me.

**Rachael Milligan:** And to all our listeners, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode where you'll find links to helpful resources and anything we've mentioned today. I hope you've been encouraged and inspired. You can find more episodes of Ayers Institute Podcast at <https://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts, and anywhere podcasts are found.

Do you have questions about character education? Let us know using the 'Ask a Question' form on the Ayers podcast website and we may feature it in a future episode. Or do you know an author or topic we might spotlight in the future? You can share your idea using the 'Suggestion Box' on our website or send us an email at [AyersInstitute@Lipscomb.edu](mailto:AyersInstitute@Lipscomb.edu).

If you would like to receive a professional learning certificate for listening to this episode, fill out the online reflection form on the Ayers podcast website and enter this 'Secret CE Code': [Code excluded from the transcript. Listen to the podcast audio.] The Ayers All Access podcast is brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation at Lipscomb University's College of Education. Learn more about our work and how we can partner with you on our website at <http://www.AyersInstitute.org>.

Until next time, remember: "Educators change the world!"